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ABSTRACT

There is a case for and a case against interscholastic sports programs below the senior high school level. Typical of concerns expressed is the fear that children under the age of thirteen are not mature enough for contact sports and risk permanent bone and joint damage. There is agreement that children need vigorous activity, but controversy exists over whether the values and benefits of competitive sports are great enough to outweigh the hazards of physical injury and emotional damage. Many believe that permanent emotional harm can be caused through the creation of "heroes" and "failures." Overemphasis on winning interferes with the school's physical education program for all children, and existing sports programs are too often designed to please parents and other spectators. Individuals intensely involved in athletic programs in their early years may tire of these activities before they reach an age where their full potential can be realized. Coaches are often preoccupied with winning extramural games, to the detriment of the general physical education program for all students. Too often the middle school team may serve as a resource pool for the senior high varsity team, diminishing opportunities for all students except those with high ability for the sport. The nature of the majority of physical education and sports programs at the middle and junior high school levels reflects an alarming gap between what is known about the characteristics and needs of these students and actual practice. (JD)

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**FOCUS ON
INTERSCHOLASTIC SPORTS
AND
THE MIDDLE SCHOOL
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INTERSCHOLASTIC SPORTS AND THE MIDDLE SCHOOL

C. Kenneth McEwin

Interscholastic sports programs have long been a traditional component of the American Educational system. However, many educators, physicians, sports figures, youth leaders and parents are expressing their concern over the appropriateness of varsity-type sports programs for middle and junior high school level youngsters.¹

Others believe interscholastic sports offer many benefits and should be of high priority in middle and junior high school programs.^{2, 3} This controversy concerning interscholastic sports at levels below senior high has existed for at least thirty years and shows no signs of abating.

As the middle school movement has gained momentum in recent years, a reexamination of the nature of programs for transescents has emerged. This search for better ways to educate emerging adolescents has raised serious questions concerning the place of competitive varsity sports in the middle school. At this time when numerous schools and school systems are evaluating the role of physical education and sports, it seems essential to focus on the issue in some detail. Regardless of personal feelings about the controversy, all aspects of the issue should be carefully examined by those responsible for making these decisions which so profoundly affect the welfare of these youth.



The Case For Interscholastic Sports

Proponents of interscholastic sports for levels below senior high school believe many benefits are derived from participation in varsity-type sports activities. Among the most common claims are the following:

- One of the best ways to learn to meet problems and overcome obstacles in life is through competing with others on the athletic field.
- Competitive sports allow individuals to live up to their potential and become leaders.
- Sports are fun, offer opportunities to make friends, and offer additional play activities.
- Early training may lead to the awarding of a college scholarship.
- Sports stress physical fitness.
- Good sportsmanship is learned.
- Competitive sports will be played anyway; therefore, the school should sponsor and control the programs.
- Sports programs help prevent delinquency.
- Competitive sports programs build school spirit.
- Competitive sports pay their own way and sometimes help finance other sports activities.

Although these advantages are often accepted as fact, many significant questions regarding their validity at the middle school level have surfaced. Evidence of the detrimental effects which may occur when transcents engage in interscholastic sports has received much attention in recent years.

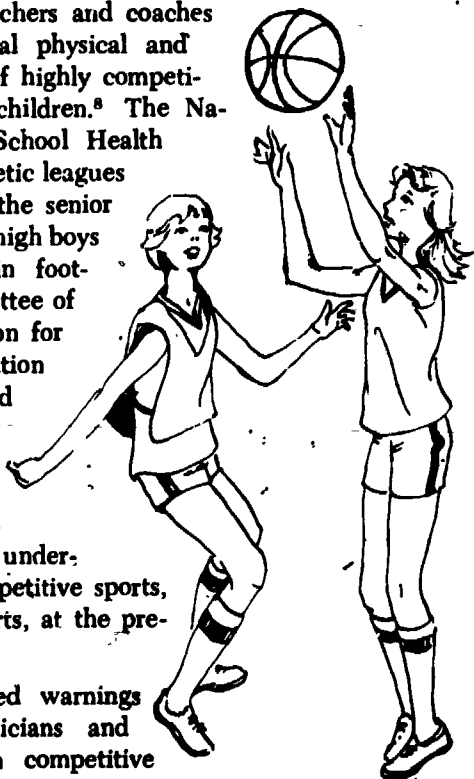
The Case Against Interscholastic Sports

Many individuals and professional organizations have criticized interscholastics at the middle and junior high school level. In 1952, a joint committee from the National Education Association, the National Council of State Consultants in Elementary Education, the Department of Elementary School Principals, the Society of State Directors of Health, Physical Education and Recreation, and the American Association of Health, Physical Education and Recreation issued a statement disapproving organized competition below the ninth grade.⁵

In 1954, the National Education Association and the American Association of School Administrators published a report stating that no junior high school should have a team which competes with school teams of other schools and that varsity-type sports for boys and girls should not be permitted.⁶ James B. Conant was greatly concerned with the suitability of interscholastic sports at the junior high school level. After a comprehensive study, he stated, "Interscholastic athletics and marching bands are to be condemned in the junior high schools; there is no sound educational reason for them and too often they serve as public entertainment."⁷

At the 20th World Congress of Sports Medicine, a symposium on "Sports and the Child" was conducted. The delegates issued a warning to parents, teachers and coaches concerning the potential physical and psychological dangers of highly competitive sports for young children.⁸ The National Committee on School Health stated, "Interscholastic athletic leagues should be confined to the senior high schools. . . . Junior high boys should not compete in football."⁹ A special committee of the American Association for Health, Physical Education and Recreation stated that, "Unless a school or community can provide exemplary supervision—medical and educational—it should not undertake a program of competitive sports, especially collision sports, at the pre-adolescent level."¹⁰

In spite of repeated warnings from educators, physicians and others, participation in competitive athletics has continued to increase.¹¹ It is now time to place personal preferences aside and carefully consider the implications of the warnings that competitive



sports may be injurious to the mental and physical health of middle grades students.

The majority of those who oppose interscholastic sports are not resisting athletics as such, but would like to see sports opportunities for larger numbers of students. It is generally believed that a quality physical education program complemented by a well designed intramural plan is desirable and should receive high priority. However, there is less agreement about the role interscholastic sports should play in the middle grades. The following topics are among those most commonly addressed when the competitive sports issue is considered.

Injury Rates

It is reported that 17 million Americans are injured badly enough while playing sports each year to need a physician's care. This number includes one in every three under the age of fifteen. Twelve million suffer permanent physical impairment on the playing fields before they reach age eighteen. This level of physical damage was not reached even by polio in the prevaccine days.¹²

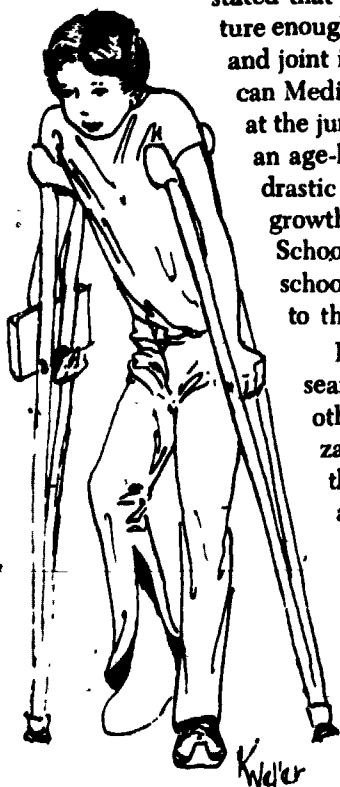
As the contact in contact sports increases, so does the likelihood of injury. High injury sports include not only football, but other sports such as wrestling and gymnastics has a reported injury rate of one injury for every two participants.¹³ There is also evidence that the younger the participant, the more likely the chance of injury. One insurance company analyzed 46,000 claims and found that those of junior high school age were five times as likely to be injured as eighteen year olds. Another company reported that seventh, eighth, and ninth grade football players accounted for over 50 percent of their claims.¹⁴ This percentage seems very significant when one considers that the football team is made up of less than 10 percent of the school population.

Typical of concerns expressed is the fear that children under the age of thirteen are not mature enough for contact sports and risk permanent bone and joint damage. There is also concern that the punishment and fatigue of strenuous competition can throw a damaging overload on immature hearts, brains and kidneys.^{15, 16}

Although there are relatively few national statistics on the extent of athletic injuries at the middle school level, it is evident that a serious problem exists. When Lowman polled 900 orthopedists re-

garding athletic activities of adolescents, he found that approximately 75 percent of the respondents agreed that athletic competition should be discouraged in a program for adolescent youngsters. The majority felt body contact sports, especially football, should be ruled out. Most of those approving of interscholastic sports qualified their answers to the extent that would practically rule out athletics as practiced today.¹⁷

Dr. George Maksim of the American Academy of Pediatrics stated that "Children under thirteen aren't mature enough for such sports and the risk of bone and joint injury is just too great." The American Medical Association suggests that players at the junior high school level be matched by an age-height-weight formula to help avoid drastic injuries that can lead to incomplete growth, and the National Committee on School Health Policies stated that, "Interscholastic athletic leagues should be confined to the senior high schools."¹⁸



In spite of cautions issued by researchers, the medical profession and other respected individuals and organizations, many of those charged with the responsibility for the education and welfare of transescentals refuse to take a realistic look at the situation. Apparently they fear that opposing the popular entertainment of competitive sports will make them unpopular. Meanwhile, contact sports continue to take their heavy toll of injuries to the growing bodies of middle grades youngsters.

There is considerable agreement that children need vigorous activity for optimum growth and development. There is disagreement, however, that the values and benefits of competitive sports are great enough to outweigh the hazards of physical injury and emotional damage.

Emotional Damage

Transescents are not miniature adults or "little pros" and should not be treated as such, for sports benefits are not automatic.¹⁹ They are in the process of rapid physical, psychological, and social growth as they approach maturity. Intense, high pressure competition may lead to strong emotional problems and affect social development.²⁰ The pressures associated with "making the team" or playing under the expectations of peers, parents, coaches and others when emotional readiness is absent will frequently result in failure and may cause permanent emotional damage.^{21, 22}

Competitive sports play is often credited with the building of character in participants. Many believe however, that interscholastic athletics have lost their perspective and do not contribute to the cultivation of the desirable character traits proclaimed by those advocating competitive sports. Pietropesa and Rosen state that: "Interscholastic sports, as they are played at the present time do not afford any unusual opportunities for the growth and development of desirable character traits."²³ Common practices associated with competitive sports events (e.g., championship games, charging gate receipts, encouraging spectators) add greatly to the emotional pressures that are placed on developing and often immature emerging adolescents.²⁴ Many transescents are not yet emotionally equipped to face striking out in front of everyone and "losing the game." The effects of interscholastic athletics upon emotional development, personality, and character development of immature youth are difficult to determine. Many believe permanent emotional injuries are caused by making competitive sports heroes and failures out of players before they can adequately handle the pressures that accompany these roles.²⁵

The Pressure To Win

Concern has been expressed about the importance of winning in competitive sports at the elementary, middle and junior high school levels.²⁶ Overemphasis on winning interferes with the school's physical education program for all children and existing sports programs are too often designed to please parents and other spectators.²⁷ Clearly the real problem evolves from the stressing of contest outcomes above the benefits which should be derived by the players.

Large number of transescentals cannot make the team because of insufficient size, skill, strength, or experience. Programs which emphasize a high level of competition tend to force adult standards of success on those who do make the team. According to a recent survey, however, 72 percent of the children polled said they would rather play regularly on a losing team than sit on the bench of a winning one.²⁸ These results should be considered when the nature of sports programs is being established. It is time that all students should have a real chance for success. The objective can be accomplished through a strong physical education program which emphasizes life sports and a comprehensive intramural program.

The Burned Out Theory

Individuals intensely involved in athletic programs in their early years may tire of these activities before they reach an age where their full potential can be realized. Those exposed to rigid authoritarian training at early ages may reach a saturation point that may lead to later hostility toward acquired skills.^{29, 30, 31} With national tournaments existing for children under the age of eight and several million participating in league football, baseball, and nearly every other sport practiced in the United States, it seems essential to consider this issue carefully. Is it the goal of the middle school physical education program to perpetuate these practices?

Fan and Parent Behavior

The incidence of civil disorder among those who watch, participate in, and administer sports events has increased in recent years. Many accounts of detrimental parent and spectator behavior have been documented by the media. Potentially positive aspects of highly competitive programs are frequently questioned in view of the human conflict involved. It has become common sports play for people to abuse the human rights of others in achieving the two objectives usually associated with successful performance — winning and "looking good."³²

Too often there seems to be little understanding or concern by the majority of parents when the health and welfare of their children are considered. Some parents push their children too hard wanting to be proud at the expense of their offspring. Others strive for social acceptance and attention through the accomplishments of their children and begin to push them to win college scholarships.³³

Some administrators and coaches say they can keep a perspective and not allow competitive sports to get out of hand. However, educators who might vigorously oppose parental effort to establish the curriculum in academic areas will frequently allow community pressure to dictate the nature and scope of the athletic program.³⁴ It is time to determine which type of sports programs are of value and put forth efforts to gain the support and trust of parents and other members of the community.

Coach Behavior

The middle and junior high school has been described as a training ground for coaches. Coaches may accept positions in order to obtain more training hoping to be promoted to the senior high coaching staff. The resulting preoccupation with winning may lead to decisions that are based on "looking good" and not on what is best for the individual players involved. This situation leads to coach behavior which is anything but conducive to teaching sportsmanship and respect for others. A study conducted by California State University found coaches screaming at kids in sports activities. One of the major conclusions of the study was that serious doubt exists that competitive sports build character.³⁵

Coaching at the middle grades level often leads to additional monetary supplements for teacher/coaches. This situation makes objectivity on the part of these coaches difficult when considering the benefits of interscholastic versus an intramural program. The potential loss of financial benefits may influence their support of intramural programs. It would seem logical, however, that the financial commitment budgeted for interscholastic coaches be redirected to a program which would allow large numbers of students to benefit from the expertise of these coaches.

When physical education teachers are appointed as teacher/coaches, all too often the coaching aspect of the assignment receives the highest priority. Unfortunately, few seem to care what the physical education teacher does, but everyone seems to know what the varsity team does. Since the coach's ego is on the line in all sports contexts the result is often more of a coach and less of a physical education teacher. Another result may be that physical education classes become carbon copies of the interscholastic program, leaving the already neglected physical education program to further deteriorate.³⁶ There is no room in the middle grades for

coaches who build their egos, ambitions, reputations or bank balances by expounding the benefits of interscholastic sports while continuing to disregard what is best for the youth of our nation.²⁷

It has been noted that some senior high coaches apply pressure on middle/junior high school coaches to win. The middle school team may serve as a farm club for the senior high varsity team.²⁸ There are complaints that some senior high coaches require middle grades coaches to instruct their teams in plays identical to those used in the high school.²⁹ Sports programs in middle and junior high schools *must not* exist as senior high school varsity training grounds.

Diminished Opportunities For All

Inadequate financial support of middle/junior high school teams leaves players with inferior equipment, inadequate physical examinations, poor in-game care, poor officials, poor fields, and inept coaching. The cost of coaches' salaries, upkeep of facilities, transportation, equipment and officials is immense. This cost diverts needed funds from areas which could benefit large numbers of students.^{40, 41} Ricken states:

"Aspects of varsity athletic programs like the selection process, budgetary expenditures, and the domination of the gymnasium and athletic facilities are examples of inequality of educational opportunity. In fact, the entire program could be considered antithetical to the goals of education."⁴²

It is claimed that competitive sports programs support themselves by gate receipts. This may be true of selected senior high school programs, but the business of paid admissions does not usually meet the cost of athletic programs at the middle and junior high school levels.⁴³

There is also concern over the degree of disruption caused by competitive sports and their related activities. Pep rallies, practice sessions, early dismissal for games, ticket selling, and other related activities cause too many disruptions in the school's primary function—that of providing a quality educational program for *all*.^{44, 45, 46}

The Star System

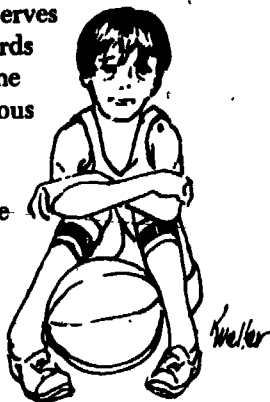
The large investment required to operate a competitive sports program frequently leads to what George has termed the "star system"⁴⁷ This is a system in which the largest share of monetary and human resources are expended on a small percentage of the

elite while the general school population suffers. The overlooked often include females who are not accorded a fair share of the resources^{48, 49, 50}. A plethora of middle grades competitive sports programs exemplify this situation.

The star system results when much of the coaching expertise, prime faculty time, media recognition, parental involvement and other resources are channelled towards producing the best performers. This common practice is detrimental to those who need the most help—the average and weak performer.

Those who do "make the team" enjoy a temporary and shallow popularity, often with a detrimental effect on other activities, particularly the academic program. The psychological impact upon those who try out and are cut from the team is not easily measured. However, this impact is substantial and deserves consideration. Special attention and rewards may also lead to problems with peers. In some instances "jocks" are made fun of and serious problems develop between them and the less accomplished.

The practice of spending disproportionate amounts of money and human resources on so few is at least questionable, at best ludicrous. The physical education program, and the intramural program which complements it, must not take second place to interscholastic programs. Guidelines are available for those who dare to face reality and fight for the improvement of physical education and sports programs.⁵² Quality physical education is too important to be offered only to the early maturing few.



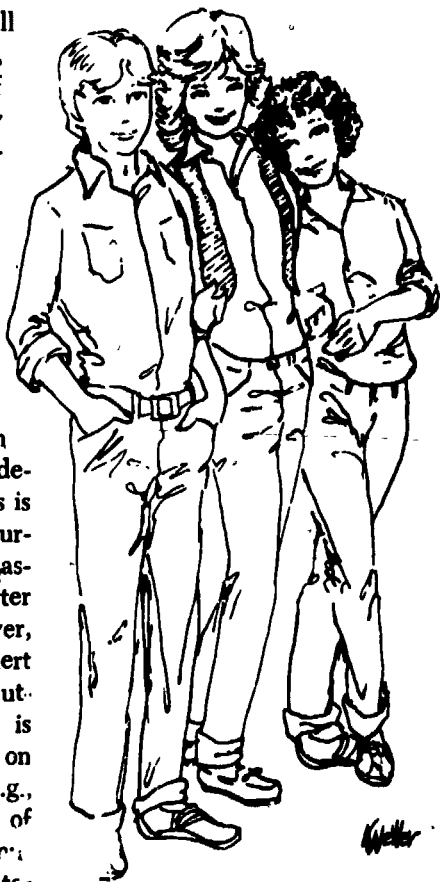
Conclusion

Resolution of this issue remains in the hands of the reader. For many years it has been realized that varsity-type competitive sports are not appropriate for transescent. The nature of the majority of the physical education and sports programs at the middle and junior high school levels reflect an alarming "lack of fit" between what is known about the characteristics and needs of these youth and actual practice.

Now, as in the past, the majority of persons making decisions about sports refuse to seriously consider the effects of interscholastic sports on middle school students. If this reality was recognized and confronted, the resulting changes would be major and require a battle with one of education's oldest culprits—tradition. Unfortunately numerous well-intentioned persons fail to recognize the significance and importance of matching the nature and intensity of athletic competition with human growth and development characteristics. They feel varsity sports are beneficial to all regardless of age or grade level.

Those seeking changes will be viewed, at least initially, negatively by some segments of the educational world and by significant numbers of community members. Yet, when one considers the alternative to this action, grim realizations surface.

Excuses offered for inaction include, "They are going to play anyway so we may as well organize and sponsor the programs." The claim that school sponsorship will decrease the possibility of injuries is not supported by accident surveys. Participants in interscholastic sports tend to have better equipment and facilities; however, it appears that other factors exert negative influences which outweigh advantages gained. It is believed that the overemphasis on winning and other factors (e.g., urging of the coach, presence of fans) provide an emotional stimulus that drives players to greater exertion than would be the case in free play situations. It is also noteworthy that, contrary to the



beliefs of many, accidents can and will occur during competitive play at a rate somewhat greater than in noninterscholastic team play.⁵³

Another common way to avoid the issue is to state that both a quality interscholastic program and a quality physical education program with intramurals can coexist. The true implementation of such programs is rare indeed. Even if financial and human resources are available, every team with the exception of the "A" team is relegated to "junior varsity" status. Numerous other reasons are given for not implementing quality programs.

The students are the ones who have to pay the price for the inaction of those in charge of their education and welfare. This writer hopes that the day will soon arrive when educators and others from related fields will design programs that will benefit all boys and girls in our schools. Quality physical education and sports programs are long overdue. It is time these programs become a reality.

The courageous must now step forward and stand up for improved programs for this important development age group. While it is easier to rationalize or ignore the issue, the price of avoidance is high with the health and welfare of millions of transescentals at stake.

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American Association for Health, Physical Education and Recreation, *Desirable Athletic Competition for Children*, p. v-vii.

Thomas Gatewood and others, *The Middle School We Need*, (Washington: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1975) p. 8.

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David L. Martin, "Competitive Sports: Are They Wasting Dollars and Ruining Youngsters Too?" *The American School Board Journal*, August, 1972, pp. 19-20.

⁵³Fait, "Should the Junior High School Sponsor Interscholastic Athletic Competition?", p. 21.



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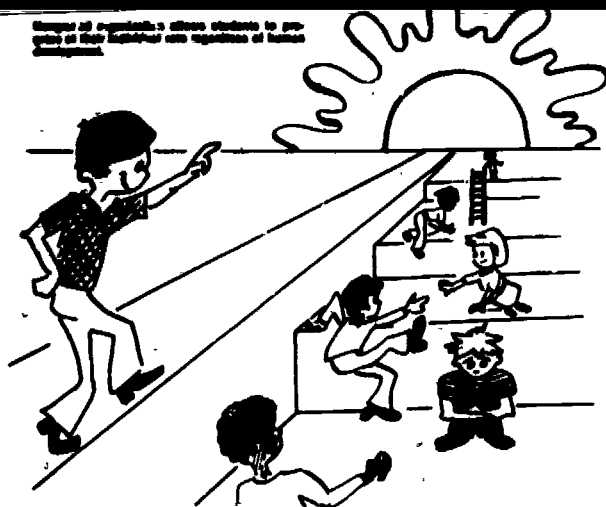
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